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VULTURES IMPORTANT TO BALANCE OF NATURE

Trained observers report a decline in the number of vultures in the heavily populated Eastern, North-Central, and Pacific States, the Interior Department said today.

These observers believe the black vulture, the turkey vulture, and the California condor are being crowded out by people, and certainly the condor is almost extinct.

"These birds need human tolerance," said Assistant Secretary Leslie L. Glasgow, who heads the Interior Department's programs for fish, wildlife, parks, and marine resources. "We must understand that vultures play a valuable role in nature. With undisturbed nesting and roosting areas, they could survive as useful members of our wildlife family," Dr. Glasgow said.

But social attitudes make survival difficult, the Assistant Secretary said. He cited the "knee-jerk distaste" for vultures and said that motion pictures often reinforce this attitude by portraying the birds as symbols of evil.

The appearance of vultures--particularly their bald heads and hooked beaks--arouses distaste, but most human revulsion arises from vulture feeding habits.

Other birds that go scavenging, however, include shearwaters, petrels, brown pelicans, eagles, hawks, skuas, gulls, crows, magpies, jays, house sparrows, and park pigeons. Vultures are not alone in their gourmet habits. And they help keep the country clean.

In other parts of the world, vultures are somewhat esteemed--and unmolested. As examples, members of one sect in India used vultures for disposal of human bodies; Mexican villages depend upon "zopilotes" for sanitation disposal and protect them both by law and custom.

According to Dr. Glasgow, "The sensible view of these great soaring birds is that, in behaving for their own benefit, they perform a useful role in cleaning up decay. They are not known to spread disease and seldom attack livestock. They must be given the right to exist along with the rest of nature's varied fauna."

